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### Literary criticism in the age of Johnson

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*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*

1930

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Bosker, A. (1930). *Literary criticism in the age of Johnson*. Noordhoff Uitgevers.

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## PREFACE

The literature of the Age of Johnson reflects the conflict between the two main factors in artistic creation, unimpassioned reason on the one side, emotion and imagination on the other. Reason had been the dominating force ever since the middle of the seventeenth century and under its powerful sway emotional and imaginative elements had been repressed, the old spontaneity of the Elizabethans had fled the domain of art, and the artistic expression of deep personal feelings had come to be looked upon with distrust. But the old romantic spirit, which had never become extinct, began to reassert itself and gradually restored the essential elements of poetic art to their proper places, so that the last decades of the eighteenth century saw the dawn of a new era, free from the restraints of common sense.

To this evolution in imaginative art the critical literature of the period offers a close parallel: in both the reaction is merely a phase of a far-reaching intellectual movement, a general revolt against the cold intellectualism of the Augustan Age. Reason and correctness, which had so long been considered by the critics as the sole arbiters of literary merit, had to yield up their authoritative position. A new conception of poetry was established, no longer based on purely rational principles, but recognizing that its primary appeal ought to be to the imagination.

It is only natural that many years were to pass before this opinion was firmly established. Rationalism in England was a strong and deep-rooted tendency, which did not at once give way when the forces that were ultimately to supplant it, began to make their influence felt. Till the very end of the century there were critics who continued to acknowledge the supremacy of common sense and tried to maintain the Augustan tradition. Thus the Age of Johnson witnessed the co-existence of two main types of criticism, one representing the old, the other illustrative of the new outlook. These two critical currents do not always move within definite

bounds. Like every period of transition the time of Johnson is characterized by a good deal of vacillation and compromise, the two prevalent influences often overlap and interpenetrate each other.

The following essay is an attempt to trace the development of this complicated struggle. It does not pretend to give a complete survey of all the changes that the dissolution of the neo-classical creed involved. Some of them, mainly those connected with the stylistic and metrical sides of the question have scarcely been touched on. Nor has much attention been paid to philosophical writers on aesthetic theory like Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, Burke and others. Their treatises are for the greater part abstract speculations on art in general and are only indirectly related with the subject in hand.

Before embarking on my proper task I have thought it requisite to discuss the chief critical tendencies that prevailed in the latter half of the seventeenth century and the first decades of the eighteenth. Aesthetic theory during the Age of Johnson is to a large extent concerned with the same problems as confronted the preceding generations of writers. The leaders of the revolt against reason, the so-called 'romantic' critics, did not advocate an entirely new creed, but contented themselves in the main with expressing their dissatisfaction with the old. A short survey of the principal tenets of this doctrine has therefore been prefixed. For this part of the book I wish to record my special indebtedness to Professor Spingarn's introduction to his *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, Professor Paul's monograph on John Dennis, and some other works, to which due acknowledgement will be made in their place, for statements which are not the result of my own research.

It remains to express my sincere thanks to Professor Dr. P. N. U. Harting for the friendly advice he has given me during the progress of this study, and the valuable aid he has rendered me in seeing it through the press. I gratefully acknowledge the services of Mr. J. A. Falconer, M. A., reader in the University of Groningen, to whom I owe several useful suggestions for the revision of the text. Acknowledgement is also due to Mr. W. J. Blyth Crotch of Wembley Park (Middlesex) for looking through the MS. and

furnishing me with a number of corrections, to Mr. B. J. Timmer of Wageningen for doing some research for me in London and reading some of the proofs, and last of all to the staffs of the British Museum and the Library of the University of Groningen, of whom the name of Mr. A. I. Ellis of London and that of Mr. A. Nienhuis of Groningen, deserve special mention.

A. BOSKER.

GRONINGEN, January 1930.

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